

POTENTIAL AND COMPLIMENTARITY IN COLUMBUS, OHIO

Darren M. Kelly, Architect
San Francisco CA
25 November, 2008

It's easing into ruin now, abandoned and succumbing to entropy, but overlooking a ravine just east of downtown Columbus, Ohio there is a virtually unknown, remarkable example of 20th Century Modernist architecture. The Gunning House on East Broad Street evidences the ambitious collaboration between Columbus native Theodore van Fossen and friend sculptor Tony Smith. Following the tumultuous year of 1937-38 together at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, van Fossen and Smith worked as carpenters during the construction of Frank Lloyd Wright's design for the Andrew F.H. Armstrong residence in Ogden Dunes, Indiana.

Returning to Columbus after work on the Armstrong House was finished, van Fossen, at age 19, secured a commission in 1939 by Robert and Mary Gunning to design a family residence. He contacted Smith, who had returned home to New Jersey, to join him in Columbus. Theodore van Fossen would lead the design effort and Taliesin fellow Tony Smith would design millwork and supervise construction.



Preparations just prior to presenting proposed design to Gunnings, 1939

From left, Theodore van Fossen, Larry Cuneo, Tony Smith

Photograph courtesy of Nora Gunning

The original structure, completed in 1940, displays not only van Fossen's affinity for Wright's planning principles and materiality, but an early talent for siting structures that would be initiated at Rush Creek Village in Worthington 15 years later on a scale unmatched by any single residential architect of the era. With its flat roof, built-in furniture, radiant floors, and views through walls of glass, the

Gunning House is clearly an exploration of the lessons van Fossen and Smith learned from their experience on the Armstrong House. Clearly missing, however, is Wright's affection for integrated ornament, revealing the European Modernist influence from van Fossen's time in Chicago with Laslo Maholy-Nagy. Scale is modulated, instead, through the sandstone masonry, quarried on site; alternating projected courses regulate horizontal mullions along the façade and millwork throughout the interior.



Main House interior
Photograph courtesy of Nora Gunning

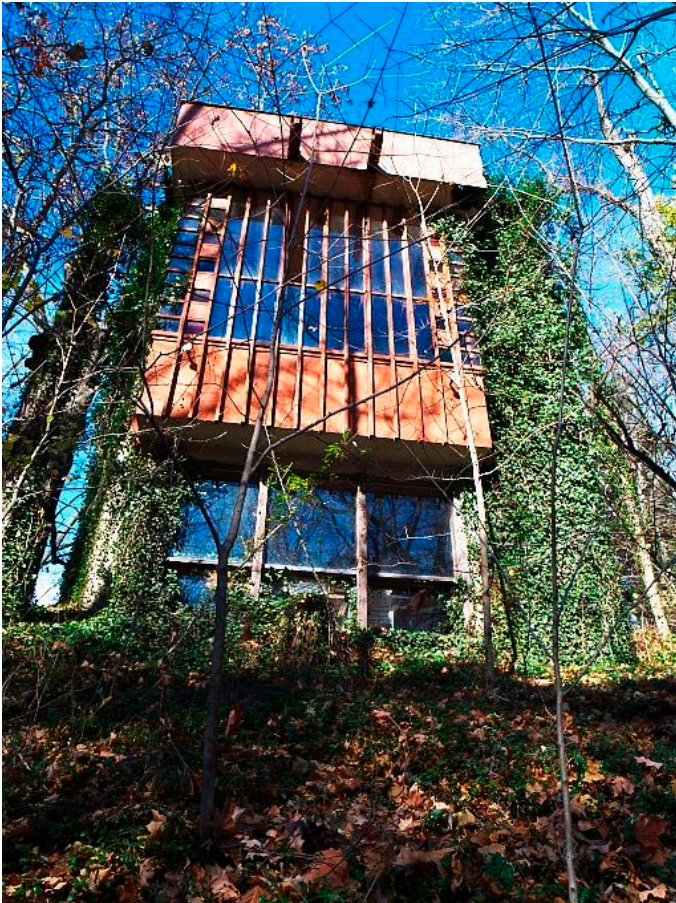
In stark contrast to the existing residence, Columbus firm Tibbals, Crumley, Musson Architects added an International Style covered walkway and carport in 1949. Later, Theodore van Fossen would return to add the three-story tower above an existing one-story outbuilding (part of the original 1940 project). The tower, which expands upon the aesthetic of the carport addition, is an early exploration of a concept that would become the Turner House at Rush Creek Village. Its cleanly articulated interlocking sculptural forms rise from the ravine edge to afford views of the creek below and opportunity to reflect upon the original residence.

Arriving at the Gunning House is a stirring experience, even in its advanced state of decline. Design of this kind was often—and still is—dismissed by the Modern and Post-modern Critique as romantic. Wright's critics still judge his work and writings harshly for stressing the romantic nature of the individual's experience with site. But van Fossen's contemporaries in the physical sciences were, as he toiled at the Gunning site, discovering that it is precisely human interaction with nature that actualizes it: the separateness perceived between nature and observer—the foundation of the Modern Project for 300 years—is an illusion. Theodore van Fossen's body of work, begun in earnest here on East Broad Street,

is a humble exploration of this human exchange with nature, of the idea that the individual's experience with nature can be transcendent. Even in its advanced state of disrepair, the endangered Gunning House stands as a reminder that the built environment can promote that transcendence.



Tower rooftop trellis and outdoor Murphy bed
Photography credit: Tom Hogan



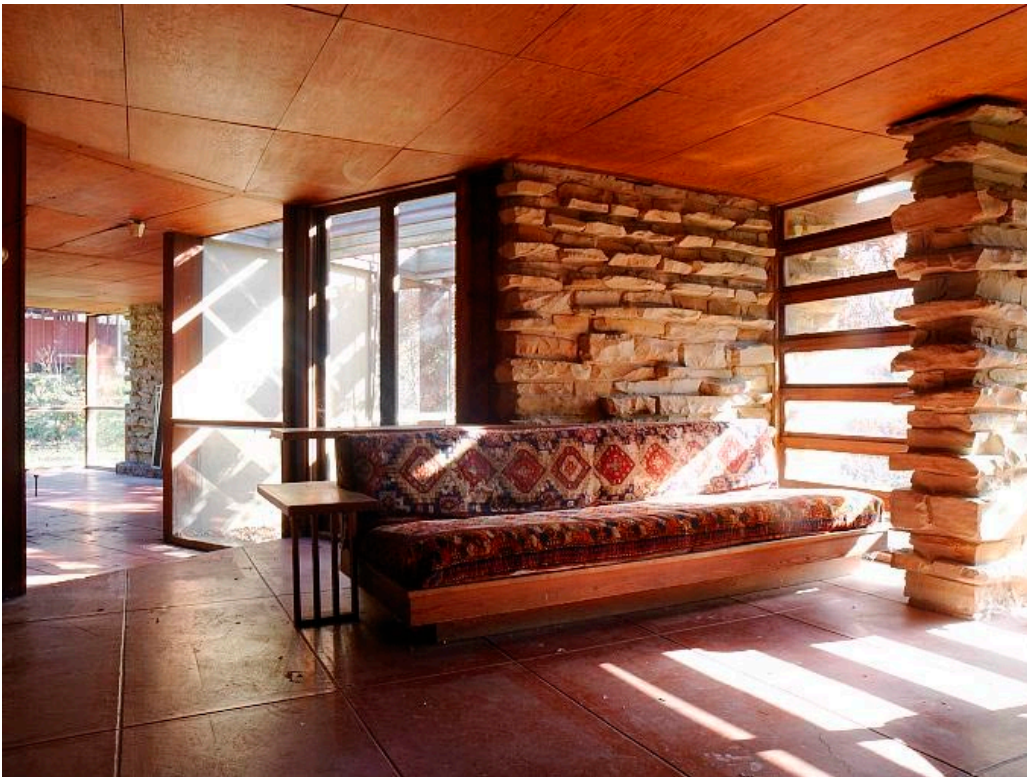
Tower

Photography credit: Tom Hogan



Tower interior, second floor

Photography credit: Tom Hogan



Main House interior

Photography credit: Tom Hogan



Main House interior
Photography credit: Tom Hogan



Main House
Photography credit: Tom Hogan



Entry patio, Main House
Photography credit: Tom Hogan